In Oberndorf, as in any small village, rumors spread quickly. In almost no time at all that 24th day of December, 1818, every citizen of the tiny Austrian town knew that there would be no music for the Christmas Eve Mass. That morning when Franz Gruber had gone to the Church of St. Nicholas to practice his pieces for the evening, he had been unable to extract from the organ any sound louder than a whisper. Upon investigation he found that the leather bellows which supplied the wind for the instrument had been nibbled by a mouse—a whole family of mice, it would seem, since the hole was such a big one. And even if it could be mended, which seemed unlikely, it would have to wait until spring when the itinerant repairman who lived in the distant Zillertal Valley would make his annual visit to Oberndorf.

Shocked into speechlessness by the catastrophe, Herr Gruber had no words for the priest who at the moment entered the church. He could only point.

Father Mohr nodded his head. “I know, my friend,” he said, placing his hand on the shoulder of the organist. “I was here earlier this morning; and when I tried the instrument myself, I discovered the damage that had been done.” He smiled rather shyly—he was a
most unassuming young man—and drew from his soutane a sheet of paper. “I have been scribbling some words for a poem.” He held out the paper. “I thought you, since you compose so well, might be able to arrange some music for it. We could teach it to the children—to take the place of the organ, you know. We might even play a guitar accompaniment for them.”

Franz took the paper and glanced at the first few words. “How ordinary!” he thought. “‘Silent Night, Holy Night, All is calm, all is bright.’ A child could have written it!” But when he saw the expectant look on the face of the priest, he put the paper in his coat. “I’ll see what can be done,” he said.

Trudging home through the drifted snow, the organist kept muttering the words under his breath, marching their pace with his footsteps: “Silent Night, Holy Night, All is calm, all is bright.”

Later by the light of a candle in his sparsely furnished room he read the poem through slowly and carefully. And suddenly a strange and wonderful thing happened. Something stirred in his breast, something that begged for release. Franz read the words again. The stirring became a fluttering, a pounding. Now he knew it for what it was—the melody for Father Mohr’s poem. He threw himself down on the bench before the spinet and placed his hands on the keys. He felt the melody flow down his arms to his fingertips.

“Glories stream from heaven afar.” Over and over he played it until it was as familiar to him as the hands that were producing it. Hastily he transcribed the notes on paper; then, closing his eyes, he bowed his head on the spinet keys and wept with exhaustion.

That night when the worshipers gathered outside the church, they were silent to the point of gloominess. Always before there had been organ music on Christmas Eve. And what was a mass without music they asked one another, shaking their heads. With the snow squeaking under their heavy boots and the stars spilling a million rays of light on their shawled and coated figures, they filed up the path and into the church, seating themselves on the wooden benches under the boughs of evergreen.

They gasped in astonishment as twelve boys and girls, accompanied by priest and organist, entered the church and stood before the altar. In the silence that followed they heard the vibrations of steel strings and the voices of the children breaking into song: “Holy Infant, so tender and mild.” The words were an act of adoration. “Christ the Saviour is born” became a shout of triumph. And when the voices sank to a whispered lullaby, “Sleep in heavenly peace,” the listening congregation enfolded the Babe in their own arms and took Him into their hearts.

Months later when the repairman came to Oberndorf to patch the damaged bellows of the organ, he asked what they had done for the Christmas Eve music. Franz took from a small cupboard at the back of the church the crumpled paper Father Mohr had left behind
when he went to his new parish.

“Keep it if you wish,” offered Herr Gruber. “With our organ mended, we have no further need of it.”

Back again in the Zillertal Valley, the repairman sang the melody to the townspeople. Some of them, journeying into Germany, introduced it there. It crossed Europe and found its way to England, then to America. It was published in hymnbooks. It is safe to say that in all the world today there is no country where “Silent Night” has not been heard, no great cathedral or tiny chapel where it has not been sung.

In spite of the song’s popularity, however, there are places where the name of Joseph Mohr and Franz Gruber have never been heard, or, if they have, they have been forgotten.

But Oberndorf remembers, and on the site of the former Church of St. Nicholas it has built a chapel in memory of the two whose genius burned so brightly, and for so short a time. Every Christmas Eve the children of Oberndorf gather in front of the chapel and, to the accompaniment of Franz Gruber’s guitar (preserved to this day by his descendants), lift their voices in the song first heard in their village in 1818.


Quote: “One of the most tragic things I know about human nature is that all of us tend to put off living. We dream of some magical rose garden over the horizon—instead of enjoying the roses that are blooming outside our window today.”—By Dale Carnegie, *These Times*.

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It is said of the great artist Michelangelo that when at work he wore over his forehead, fastened on his cap, a lighted candle, so that no shadow of himself might fall upon the marble or the canvas. We need to take exceeding care that no shadow of ourselves, our personal ambitions, our self-seeking, falls upon that which we are doing for Christ.—By F. L. McKeans, *These Times*, December 1960.

Quote: “The New Jerusalem choir sang when the Babe was born, and even the shepherds understood the words of the song.”—By Charles G. Bellah, *Signs of the Times*, November
Rowland Hill used to tell a good story of a rich man and a poor man in his congregation. The rich man desired to do an act of benevolence, so he sent a sum of money to a friend to be given the poor man as he thought best. The friend just sent him five pounds and said in the note: “This is thine. Use it wisely. There is more to follow.”

After a while he sent another five pounds and said, “More to follow.”

Again and again he sent the money to the poor man, always with the cheering words, “More to follow.”

So it is with the wonderful grace of God. There is always “more to follow.”—By Dwight L. Moody, *These Times*, December 1958.

Quote: “Patient waiting is often the highest way of doing God’s will.”—by Jeremy Collier, *These Times*, September 1963.

Edwin Booth once gave this crisp bit of advice to a group of young actors: “The king sits in every audience; play to the king.” And the King of kings stands in the midst of all the common things of life; play to the King.—By Albert G. Butzer, *These Times*, July 1959.
Quote: “People seldom improve when they have no model but themselves to copy after.”—By Goldsmith, Signs of the Times, April 12, 1899.

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Value just one soul. For one may be many. Andrew brought Simon—just one. But that one was many, for under God Simon brought 3,000 in one day.

Joel Stratton, a waiter in a restaurant, brought John Gough to Christ—just one. And Gough brought many to Christ.

Ezra Kimball, a Sunday School teacher, brought Moody to Christ—just one man. But that one was many, for Moody rocked two continents toward God.

But why say more? Just as one digit is valuable in the multiplication table and one letter in the alphabet—far more valuable is the conviction of the value of just one soul in God’s sight.—By R. G. Lee, These Times, November 1966.

Quote: “If we accustom ourselves to self-denial, we break the force of most temptations.”—By Bond, Signs of the Times, January 30, 1893.

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Are you willing—

- To stoop down and consider the needs and desires of little children;
- To remember the weakness and loneliness of people who are growing old;
- To stop asking how much your friends love you, and to ask yourself whether you love them enough;
- To bear in mind the things that other people have to bear on their hearts;
- To trim your lamp so that it will give more light and less smoke, and to carry it in front so that your shadow will fall behind you;
- To make a grave for your ugly thoughts and a garden for your kindly feelings, with the gate open?
Are you willing to do these things for a day? Then you are ready to keep Christmas!—
By Henry van Dyke, *These Times*, December 1962.

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Compiled by Dale Galusha. Please pass this newsletter on to others.

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